

Antarctica

Laura Bowler



Bark

Europa

tall ship

In January 2018 I embarked on the most amazing journey of my life so far, thanks to the incredible support of the Finzi Trust. I sailed from Ushuaia, Argentina, down to Antarctica on the Bark Europa. These four incredible weeks, from the journey down across the Drake Passage to the journey back up, were filled with sounds, landscapes and visceral experiences that filled my multimedia orchestral work commissioned by the Manchester Camerata and BBC Radio; Antarctica.



Audio Diary and Recording

During my time on the Bark Europa, I recorded an audio diary for the BBC Radio 3, which can be heard here-

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p071xfly>

Elements of these audio diaries made it into the final composition, giving a sense of documentary to the work.

Through out my time in Antarctica I was both filming and audio recording to build a catalogue of material that could be used in the final work. I was also lucky enough to have access to a hydrophone, which enabled me to record underneath icebergs as well as the incredible sounds of the Weddell Seal (they really do sound like something from a sci-fi movie).

When I originally set out on this project, I had no desire to include the experience of travelling to Antarctica, but simply wished to create an immersive multimedia experience of Antarctica itself. The journey changed this. Travelling across the Drake Passage suffering from sea sickness (something I have never suffered from before!), whilst trying to climb the rigging to furl/unfurl sails and attempting to stay on course at the helm amongst the many other tasks of being on watch, created an experience far too rich and visceral not to include in the final work.

Creating the work

Visiting Antarctica enabled me to experience this incredible, vulnerable and extreme environment first hand, giving me the opportunity to find multiple ways of translating a world that seems so far away into something that is present in the concert hall. The text of the work is collated from several sources. The earliest Antarctic poem, *Thulia: a Tale of the Antarctic (1843)* by James Croxall, opens the work. James Croxall was the assistant surgeon during the United States Exploring Expedition 1842-1843. Other texts include lyrics from sailing shanties, quotes from politicians on the subject matter of climate change and fossil fuels, extracts from Laura's audio diary, an original text by Lavinia Murray (Rehearsal mark V-EE) and an original text from Byshhe Inigo Coffey (featured on the video at Rehearsal mark FF).

The newly commissioned texts for the work came from a desire to feature a certain dramaturgical idea within the work. Lavinia Murray is a BBC Radio 4 playwright and opera librettists who I have worked with on several occasions. Her imagination is boundless, coupled with her terrifyingly vast breadth of knowledge on a range of subjects makes her a fierce and truly inspiring collaborator. I asked Lavinia for text that embodied the character of a

futuristic weather reporter. A text that was humorous but also cutting.

At the end of the work, in which I speak a text on screen, I originally wanted to use Samuel Beckett's OLD EARTH. Unfortunately, I was unable to get the rights to this text, so approached my friend Bysshe Inigo Coffey to create a text that was inspired by the Beckett but still very much in his own voice. He created the text *Soil. Bark. Thistle*

Waste. All there is. The wastage of it. Chalk and bones on an empty beach. Soon there won't be a twitch of life. The world, a marble. *Really*. And to mean that too. There's such a shock to it, in it. Horror even. So many *ITs* to contend with anyway. Dropping the names of things and faces, pale dry words, only for markers peel off. But this is old and known and people sing about it under bridges. The young one was stupid in his mouth. Dull. So fucking dull. Dull, but so sad.

A fact found in the arch of summer grass. An oily feather. Wretched spume and poisoned surf. In the root of a tongue. You choose — that's the only thing you can't choose. Non-negotiable. But it dies slowly as I die, and turns like my dry eyes.

Or so now I think in soil bark thistle.

Let the rain do its work on my eyelids. Let it find me. And there's the flashes, of course. To tumble backwards. A clown through autumn — into the short march of it. Sat between coats. Northern Line and rush. Inappropriate food. The lurching belching groping ... and the stops.

Bringing the light home from work and it stands in the eyes. And all they do—all the bad they do. Stop at the thought of all the plastic and chrome in hands or pockets. To think it might fashion a valve: help re-beat and kiss life into an old heart. An old heart stretching back to life. No. Nah. No. It holds waters, floats out to see, makes its own isle. Plastic and a long goodbye.

Terminus follows terminus.
And ours is close now. Then other lives not near me. Not
this.

But there's you. My lover in a black tight dress. Mine own. And to think
of them and theirs. Those proximities we span. Sands, skies, fruits.
How we close the wound with ... how we come together. And all the
cake. Fields and woods remain far behind me. But so does gas. So
does a species' regret.

On my back. All of it to end up on my back. Why don't
they bury you face down? Don't kiss the sky, kiss the comforting clay.
Let me say my goodbyes and apologies. Let me tell them I did wrong.
You did very wrong. Rain and let it wet my back. Let yourself turn
away. How to bury a- right. They close their eyes by covering me in
soil. It's about the gathering not the dead. So let me, let me turn my
back.

Soil bark thistle shake.

My desire in creating this work, was to take the
audience on a journey to Antarctica, enabling
them to experience the environment's unique sound world
and landscape through both the video and audio
recordings. With this in mind, the performance space at
HOME (Manchester), incorporated rigged sails over the
audience and actors preparing the "ship" for sail before we
set off on the voyage into the piece. The latter half of the
work juxtaposes this with the brutality of our impact on the
natural world.



The final work was premiered in Manchester on January 30th 2019 and later broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 2nd March 2019.

An article about my experience of being in Antarctica can also be found at-

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/feb/13/antarctica-laura-bowler-climate-change-music>



The final work and after...

**Antarctica (2018-2019) - for Vocalist, 3 Actors,
Orchestra, Live and Fixed Electronics, Live and Pre-
recorded Video**

Laura Bowler (music, film and collage libretto)

Lavinia Murray (original text Rehearsal mark V-EE)

**Byshhe Inigo Coffey (Final Spoken Text on Video
Rehearsal mark FF)**

Antarctica is an autoethnographical immersive music theatre work that explores contemporary society's destructive relationship with the planet, provoking the audience to consider that our planet is urgently at risk from climate change.

Antarctica contributes to research on vocal and instrumental music in a multimedia context, contemporary classical music as a vehicle for socio-political dialogues, the construction of collage libretti and the orchestra as a body for music-theatre exploration and experimentation. This work was the first in which Laura attempted to communicate aspects of the complex nature of climate change and its impact on both humanity and our planet. Following on from this, Laura has spent considerable time researching climate psychology in order to apply methods employed by climate scientists such as Chris Rapley into her future work on the subject matter; *the temperatures*

aren't what they used to be commissioned by London Sinfonietta to be premiered April 2021 and a co-composed project with Sarah Nicolls; *Epiphany* commissioned by Prism and Manchester Science Festival for premiere in 2022.

Laura Bowler

Laura Bowler, described as “a triple threat composer-performer-provocatrice” (The Arts Desk) is a composer, vocalist and Artistic Director specialising in theatre, multi-disciplinary work and opera. She has been commissioned across the globe by ensembles and orchestras including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, ROH2, Opera Holland Park, The Opera Group, Manchester Camerata, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Quatuor Bozzini (Canada), Ensemble Phace (Austria), Ensemble Linea (France) and Omega Ensemble (Australia).

Her recent projects include; a music theatre work, FFF, for ensemble and vocalist commissioned by BBC Radio 3 and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival; Feminine Hygiene, a multimedia work for large ensemble and vocalist commissioned by the BBC Philharmonic and Sounds from the Other City Festival; Damned Mob of Scribbling Women- a 20 minute music theatre song cycle for Lucy Goddard which was nominated for a British Composer Award; and Antarctica, a 50 minute multimedia work for orchestra and vocalist co-commissioned by Manchester Camerata and BBC Radio 3.

As a vocal soloist she has performed and premiered works internationally, including the premiere of Louis Aguirre’s *The Way The Dead Love* as part of European Capital of Culture Aarhus programme and the world and Canadian premieres of Jennifer Walshe’s boxing opera, *Training is the Opposite*. She is also the vocalist in contemporary music ensemble, Ensemble Lydenskab based in Aarhus, Denmark, and has recently formed a duo with Red Note Ensemble’s flautist, Ruth Morley. Upcoming projects include *Gold*, a music theatre work based on *Rumpelstiltskin* for Riot Ensemble with librettist Alasdair Middleton, and a new multimedia work for multidisciplinary group, Decoder Ensemble for Huddersfield Contemporary Music

Festival, a multimedia work for composer/pianist Zubin Kanga, as well as new smaller scale works for singer Alwynne Pritchard and nyckelharpist Robert Bentall.

Laura completed her BMus (Hons) at the RNCM and Sibelius Academy (Finland), followed by her MMus and PhD at the Royal Academy of Music. She also completed an MA in Theatre Directing at RADA. She is currently Lecturer in Composition at Guildhall School of Music and Drama and Royal Northern College of Music.